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The James Irvine Foundation Honors Six California Leaders for Innovative Solutions to Major State Challenges

*Gov. Schwarzenegger Commends Recipients of 2007 Leadership Awards;
Foundation Awards \$625,000 for Work that Improves California's Future*

SAN FRANCISCO — The recipients of the 2007 James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards were announced today. The six recipients, representing five organizations, were awarded \$125,000 per organization for successfully tackling pressing state issues that many considered intractable. The goal of the awards program, now in its second year, is to recognize and celebrate individuals who have demonstrated ingenuity, dedication, and collaboration — and to encourage other leaders to adopt similar approaches and solutions.

Gov. Schwarzenegger lauded this year's recipients, who have made significant impacts on issues ranging from education in low-performing schools to the role of theater in building community to global warming, air quality, and flood control.

“The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award recipients are model citizens for their exceptional work to improve their communities and California,” said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. “These Californians have demonstrated visionary leadership in their ability to successfully work across sectors in business, education, environment, and the arts. I want to congratulate all of the recipients for their extraordinary achievements in each of their respective fields.”

“The Leadership Award recipients once again remind us that, as insurmountable as some challenges may appear, solutions are in reach,” said Jim Canales, President and CEO of The James Irvine Foundation. “And through their work with a variety of stakeholders, this year's recipients prove that solutions can truly be a win-win for everyone involved. These leaders remind us that remarkable results are possible when we develop innovations with everyone at the table.”

This year's recipients include:

Ashley Boren, Sustainable Conservation, San Francisco

Overcoming a history of distrust between farmers and environmentalists, Ashley Boren draws on her direct business and conservation experience to find practical ways for agriculture and other businesses to move toward environmental sustainability — without compromising their bottom lines. For example, her work with dairy farmers to install methane digesters is saving millions in farm energy costs while reducing greenhouse gas emissions from manure and generating renewable energy. To protect biodiversity, she launched a statewide partnership among horticulture industry leaders to voluntarily stop the sale of invasive plants and promote safe alternatives.

Cesar Calderon, Soledad Enrichment Action, Los Angeles

In 1985, Cesar Calderon's 16-year-old brother became homeless on the streets of Los Angeles. Fortunately, he found his way to Soledad Enrichment Action (SEA) High School and turned his life around. Grateful and inspired, Calderon himself joined the organization, which operates 23 education centers and is one of the state's largest charter schools focused exclusively on high-risk youth. Most of its students have dropped out of conventional schools, are on probation, and read below their grade level. Many come from poor families, struggle with drug abuse, domestic violence, and teen pregnancy. But through an individualized academic program, SEA brings together parents, mental health and drug counselors, and probation officers in a comprehensive approach that touches 4,000 lives every year. In the last five years, 82 percent of students either graduated from high school, passed their GED exam, or are still in school.

John Carlon and Tom Griggs, River Partners, Chico

Hurricane Katrina raised national awareness of the vulnerability of certain flood areas, including Sacramento, where deteriorating levees present the highest flood risk of any major U.S. city. Presenting an innovative alternative to traditional civil engineering approaches to flood control, River Partners helps farmers, landowners, and public agencies craft restoration agreements that balance environmental needs with local, economic, and recreational requirements. Co-founder John Carlon, a blueberry farmer, and Tom Griggs, its senior ecologist, lead the effort with their diplomatic skills and scientific expertise. By forging unlikely alliances among farmers, conservationists, and government agencies, River Partners has reforested 6,000 acres in 24 restoration projects along six major rivers. Their work has brought back wildlife species once believed lost and created more open space, making the public safer through strong flood control.

Yvonne Chan, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, Pacoima

At age 17, Yvonne Chan arrived in California from Hong Kong with just \$100 in her pocket. After spending time in Fresno and East Los Angeles, Chan found much in common with first-generation, Spanish-speaking immigrants in the San Fernando Valley. She never lost sight of this during her 40 years as a teacher and principal. In 1993, she led Vaughn Next Century Learning Center — a failing elementary school with some of the state's lowest test scores — to become the first school in the country to convert to charter status (now serving preschool to grade 12 students). Greater autonomy allowed Vaughn to develop an effective model that includes smaller classes, high expectations, a teacher accountability system, and community partnerships that support children and families by addressing the factors that lead to absenteeism, poor grades, dropping out, or violence. She also prepares students for today's global economy, requiring all students to learn Mandarin and setting up science and multimedia labs in former crack houses near the schools. As a result, the school's Academic Performance Index scores have jumped nearly 60 percent from 1999 to 2006.

Sheldon Epps, Pasadena Playhouse, Pasadena

The Pasadena Playhouse is officially California's state theater, but poor attendance has threatened to close its doors more than once in its long history. Up until the last decade, when the theater did put on performances, often there would be no people of color — and few under 60 — in the audience. Enter Sheldon Epps in 1997, one of the few African-American artistic directors of a major regional theater in the country. His commitment to diversity and the production of an eclectic range of high-quality performances has led to the Playhouse's remarkable renaissance. Today it is recognized nationally for its commitment to theatrical diversity, artistic excellence, and box-office success. The Playhouse offers a broad range of high-quality productions, draws a younger and multiethnic audience and conducts programs to expose disadvantaged youth to live theater, while maintaining steady growth in subscriptions and ticket sales.

More information about The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards can be found at www.irvine.org/leadership.

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